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bryant cottage

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LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES

Bryant Cottage, a state memorial at Bement in Piatt County, holds a peculiar position in the picturesque history of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. To understand its place in history, one must look back to June 16, 1858, when the Republican State Convention nominated Abraham Lincoln as its "first and only candidate for United States Senator." His opponent would be incumbent Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln began his campaign the evening of his nomination as he delivered his famous "House Divided" speech in the old State Capitol in Springfield.

Senator Douglas, in Washington, realized that he must wage a vigorous campaign for re-election for his third term as senator. He returned to Chicago and on the evening of July 9 delivered the opening speech of his campaign from the balcony of the Tremont House. Lincoln was present but declined to speak, as it was Douglas' meeting; however, the next evening from the same balcony, Lincoln addressed the people.

The two statesmen then shifted the locale of their campaign downstate, each appearing in Bloomington, July 16, with Douglas speaking and Lincoln declining as it was a Douglas meeting. The next day, July 17, the two men spoke in Springfield, Douglas in the B. S. Edwards grove and Lincoln in the Statehouse.

Lincoln returned to Chicago July 22 and was again a Tremont House guest. From this famous hostelry, Lincoln wrote a letter to Douglas formally challenging him to a series of nine debates, one each in the Illinois Congressional districts. Douglas reluctantly accepted the challenge, but suggested that since each candidate had spoken in Chicago and Springfield, that the series be shortened to seven and Lincoln accepted the amended program. Beginning with speeches in Clinton on July 27 and 28, a colorful campaign began throughout the counties of central Illinois.

HIGHWAY MEETING

Lincoln met Senator Douglas on the highway about a mile and a half south of Monticello on present Route 105, the afternoon of July 29, 1858. The two men conferred on the highway, where a marker and plaque stand today preserving this famous roadside conference. Lincoln then

hurried on to make a speech in Monticello, the Piatt County Seat, where Douglas had already spoken.

It was on July 29 that the Bryant Cottage in Bement came into political prominence. The cottage was erected in 1856 by Francis E. Bryant, a first cousin of William Cullen Bryant, the poet. Francis E. Bryant was an intimate friend of Senator Douglas and was deeply interested in the campaign. Politics involving the slavery problem and the threatening secession were at a peak. Bryant invited Senator and Mrs. Douglas to be his houseguests July 29 and 30, 1858, the two days they were in the Monticello-Bement area.

DEBATE DATES PLANNED

There was no railroad in Monticello at this time, so it was necessary for Lincoln to return to Bement, to take the Great Western train to Springfield. Tradition has it that on the evening of July 29 Lincoln and Douglas conferred in the Bryant Cottage and Lincoln caught the midnight train from Bement to Springfield. The next morning, from the Bryant Cottage, Douglas wrote a letter to Lincoln confirming the full schedule of the seven debates to be held as follows: Ottawa, LaSalle County, August 21; Freeport, Stephenson County, August 27; Jonesboro, Union County, September 15; Charleston, Coles County, September 18; Galesburg, Knox County, October 7; Quincy, Adams County, October 13; and Alton, Madison County, October 15.

Other details regarding the debates were in the Douglas letter written from the Bryant Cottage. Lincoln replied in a brief note from Springfield, dated July 31, and accepted all details. "I accede and thus close the arrangement," wrote Lincoln in his characteristic few words. So the details of the great debates were settled in the heart of the great cornbelt of Illinois, which again elected Douglas senator/but focused national attention upon Lincoln and led to his nomination and election as president of the United States.

THE BRYANT'S

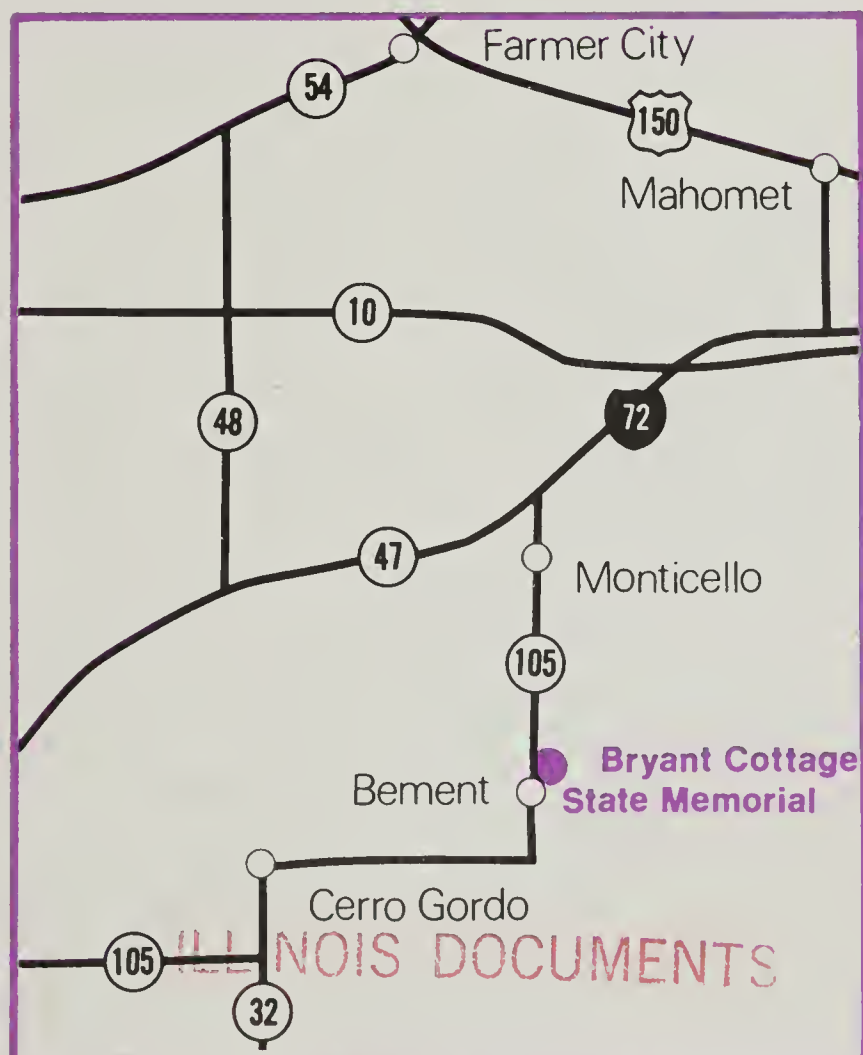
Francis E. Bryant served two periods in the Illinois General Assembly, one before and one after the Civil War. He first represented the Rushville-Quincy district, and following the war, the Piatt-

Champaign district. In 1856 he moved from Rushville, where he located in 1837, to Bement where he became a merchant, and established the first bank. Bryant was a leading citizen of Bement until his death in 1889. As a member of the General Assembly in 1868, he worked for the initial \$60,000 appropriation for the Illinois Industrial University, now the University of Illinois.

The Bryant Cottage remained in the Bryant-Sprague families for nearly a century. It was never transferred aside from inheritance, until Mrs. Lily Sprague, the donor of the Cottage, with her son Bryant Sprague, conveyed it to the State of Illinois for a permanent historical shrine. The cottage is maintained in its original condition.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

For more details about this site, contact Custodian, 146 East Wilson Street, Bement, Illinois 61813, phone 217/678-8184. For information on other Illinois State Parks and Memorials write to the Department of Conservation, Information/Education Section, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.



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